

Teaching Coetzee's *Foe* and *Disgrace*: Intertextuality and the Question of Canonicity

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This essay discusses two of J. M. Coetzee's best-known works in academic circles: both appear widely on university syllabi and offer students a chance to engage with debates on authorship, intertextuality, and canonicity. By considering the reception of these two novels, the essay charts the ways in which Coetzee's fiction is consumed locally and globally and asks questions not only about the politics of *writing*, but also the ethics of *reading* (see Attwell 1993; Huggan 2001; Attridge 2004; and Easton in Morrison & Watkins (eds), 2006).

When *Foe* was published in 1986 at the height of State of Emergency South Africa, for example, it caused a stir for its apparent remoteness from the South African situation (as the reviewer Harriett Gilbert asked: "Postmodern narratives while Soweto burns?" 28). When *Disgrace* appeared in 1999, it caused great consternation for its "bleak" representation of the "new" South Africa – not just in reviews, but also in Government quarters. At the same time, it won Coetzee many accolades, including an unprecedented second Booker Prize. What does this say about the absence of "South Africa" as a geographical marker in *Foe* compared with its stark presence in *Disgrace*?

Like Coetzee's 1994 novel, *The Master of Petersburg*, *Foe* involves a literary figure, a text, from afar, that intervenes in Coetzee's story: here it is of course Daniel Defoe, the eighteenth-century world of his *Robinson Crusoe* in particular, but also his corpus more generally; in *The Master of Petersburg* there is similarly a mix of fact, fiction and literary biography, when Coetzee uses Dostoevsky and the genesis of his novel *The Possessed*; in *Disgrace*, there is an obvious sub-text of Byron and his satire, *Don Juan*, as well as the poem *Lara*: and yet, since Byron is not exactly a character in this work, his presence too has been marginalized in the critical reception of this work.

These identifiable authors in Coetzee's novels lead us to intertextuality and the question of canonicity. How do the canonical texts of Defoe (and behind him, a host of "Robinsonades") illuminate or problematize our reading of Coetzee's *Foe*, and how might their presence affect the way that Coetzee's own novel has become canonical? Had Coetzee not borrowed from Defoe, would his novel be taught in courses that focus not on postcolonial literature or Africa, or even South Africa, but contemporary literature and postmodernism? In the case of his later novel *Disgrace*, we have quite the opposite: this novel has been set in South Africa, a pointedly *new* South Africa, where Byron, and the teaching of Romantic poetry, are of seeming irrelevance. Do we need to know Byron to understand *Disgrace*? Do we need to know Defoe to understand *Foe*?

When Coetzee received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003, he offered not a lecture but a short story called "He and His Man," in which questions of character and authorship continue: this story expands on the story in *Foe*, since it is Robinson Crusoe (now with an "e") who is seemingly alive and well in Bristol, writing about "his man" Defoe/Foe,

this busy man, who writes about plagues, and tours through England. Reading this “sequel” story-lecture alongside *Foe* raises intriguing questions about “original” texts, textual proliferations, and gaps and infiltrations in terms of gender, race, and history.

To explore the overlapping or fluid boundaries of fiction and history, we read Linda Hutcheon’s seminal essay on “historiographic metafiction” (see *The Poetics of Postmodernism*); Brenda Marshall’s incisive reading of Barthes’s essay, “From Work to Text” furthermore reminds us that intertextual readings are almost contradictory: if intertextuality is a “mosaic of quotations” without origin, as Kristeva would have it, how do we read the intertextual without falling into what Barthes calls “the myth of filiation”? (see *Teaching the Postmodern*, 132; 128). How do we dismiss the idea of origins and source studies, whilst also pointing to possible literary predecessors?

Although I have previously taught a special Honours seminar focussing – for the whole of one term – on Coetzee’s South African-based fiction (at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, South Africa), I currently teach just two of his novels, *Foe* and *Disgrace* at a small, specialised institution in the UK. At the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, the teaching of literature is based in regional departments (e.g. Africa, South Asia), while history, politics, and anthropology, for example, are taught in conventional disciplinary departments. Nevertheless, my department of African Languages & Cultures also administers an interdisciplinary BA African Studies degree, the result of which is that at the undergraduate level students might take my “History in African & Caribbean Literature” course as an elective. At the postgraduate level, our literature intake is entirely different, and students will come from far and wide to take programmes such as the

MA African Literature, MA Comparative Literature, MA African Studies, MA Gender Studies, or MA Cultural Studies. My course “Travelling Africa: Writing the Cape to Cairo” is an advanced-level literature course, designed for literature majors who already have a strong literary/critical background.

Despite the contrast between the profiles and experience of the undergraduates and postgraduates taking my courses, my pedagogical approach to both is largely the same. I run them as weekly two-hour seminars, where students are expected to take initiative, read widely, and make lively contributions to discussion. To facilitate this, I ask them to prepare “reading grids” which they bring to the seminar and/or send to me in advance by email. The formula – which they are free to adapt – is to write one or two key quotes from the primary and secondary texts, and a series of bullet points highlighting issues that these key quotes and their readings as a whole present. Taking it to the next level, they write a brief but considered and carefully drafted *critical* response of approximately 300 words, and one or two discussion points. At the end of each teaching term they submit their top seven reading grids for an assessed portfolio. My undergraduate students generally read a book per week; the postgraduates may be required to read two books weekly, with relevant critical or theoretical articles assigned.

Since we move quite swiftly from book to book, from week to week, I introduce each unit in terms of how it is situated on the syllabus, which texts it might follow, what links might be made. The emphasis is less on wide coverage, and more on the conversations between texts across the course as a whole: in other words, I actively encourage intertextual dialogue. I find out how familiar the students are with the author's work already, and then if

necessary give them a brief introduction, setting the scene for some of the issues that might be raised in the seminar in light of the geographical setting of the novel, the author's nationality, the "status" of the book (whether it is new or is considered something of a classic), and how it might fit in to the author's oeuvre. Reading a novel like *Foe* with its non-South African setting in an environment such as SOAS presents an interesting situation: the undergraduate students have just read Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and we have discussed ideas of intertextuality and "rewriting" the story of Bertha; how it can be seen as a "prequel" to Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. John McLeod's chapter in *Beginning Postcolonialism* provides an excellent introduction for this unit. But it is often the case that my undergraduate students at SOAS are not familiar with Brontë or Defoe, since many of them do not have a background in English literature. What happens when the "source" text that is being rewritten is not known? How do the students fill in the gaps? What is the effect of reading Rhys or Coetzee so that *their* novels stand on their own? We play around with these ideas, and sometimes a student will read Brontë (or see the recent BBC film adaptation of her novel) or Defoe *afterwards*. This leads us to a stimulating discussion about the idea of "original" texts, since the "original" for them now becomes the rewriting by Rhys or Coetzee! It also allows us to begin to talk about the ways in which both Rhys and Coetzee – perhaps largely through their interrogation of earlier classic works – have become canonical in a wider range of syllabi not limited to the Caribbean or African contexts they as authors might represent, but as significant texts in twentieth-century literature. I assign Derek Attridge's excellent chapter on *Foe* in *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* and highlight my own key quote, which is integral to this essay: "Coetzee has made canonic intertextuality a fundamental principle" (69).

Foe is a book that encourages exactly this kind of theoretical reading, but its style and clarity also attracts readers on a more profound and tangible level. Isabel Hofmeyr called it “an elaborate and enigmatic literary game,” but quickly acknowledged that “The book itself is very easy to read . . . the sentences are immaculately constructed (14).” Even more telling, a decade after its publication, *Foe* found its way into the South African press again when the musician and singer, Vusi Mahlasela, chose it as “My Favorite Book” for a 1996 issue of *The Sunday Independent*. Explaining his choice, Mahlasela writes: “I like Coetzee’s style. It is so simple that reading this book is like watching a movie. The story moved me because it is about a character who cannot speak and struggles to communicate (23).”

I offer these extracts to students to illustrate how the “simplicity” of Coetzee’s imitation of eighteenth-century prose is not irreconcilable with the poststructuralist and postmodernist readings privileged by extended academic discussions of the novel, including my own.

At postgraduate level, I teach *Foe* on the core theory course for MA Comparative Literature in a unit on “Historiographic Metafiction.” To link it with my previous seminar on “Archive Stories” (my framework title thanks to the edited collection by Antoinette Burton), I also read out an extract from an early draft of *Foe* that contains Coetzee’s own concerns with the story-in-progress:

Defoe’s text is full of Friday’s *Yes*; now it is impossible to fantasize that *Yes*; all the ways in which Friday can say *No* seem not only stereotyped (i.e. rehearsed over and over again in the texts of our times) but destructive (murder, rape, bloodthirsty

tyranny). What is lacking to me is what is lacking to Africa since the death of Négritude: a vision of a future for Africa that is not a debased version of life in the West (Box 10, *Foe* MSS, 5, vn 4 (1 Dec. 1983), J. M. Coetzee Papers).

The quote, courtesy of J. M. Coetzee, is an example of what I call “archival intertextuality.” I have made several visits to look at the Coetzee papers at Harvard’s Houghton Library. My interest is not in charting successive drafts or discovering if there is a more “authentic” version of *Foe* – if anything, the drafts of this novel are fascinating for the consistency of exquisite prose, and the further possible storylines they reveal. I introduce the passage to students as an example of marginal authorial commentary that has no intention of influencing readers – in fact, quite the opposite, it is Coetzee in self-reflective mode; it also offers students an insight into the process of fiction-writing, and suggests how the genesis of a work of fiction can illuminate or problematize our reading of the author’s published work that is in global circulation.

If students are not at first forthcoming in seminar discussion, one way of making the book accessible to everyone, while also beginning to address the theoretical issues I am writing about here, is to start off in friendly “book club” format: this gets everyone immediately involved as they give their “verdict” of the book and say why; we also look at the book cover – what illustration adorns the book, how has it been marketed (author photograph? Reviews?), and this then leads us to discuss Genette’s idea of *paratextuality* (which is very nicely summarised by Graham Allen in his introduction *Intertextuality*) so students begin to reflect on how much book material outside the margins of the text itself can contribute to our reading of it. The UK Vintage edition of *Disgrace*, featuring the same

illustration as the first edition of the novel published by Secker & Warburg, is useful to compare with, say, the Penguin Essential edition of *Disgrace* adopted for the US academic market. The effect of seeing the photograph of the dog in a desolate landscape on the UK cover, versus the white, blank cover of the American edition, gives students a chance to consider how much their reading is visually informed before they even read Coetzee's prose. We now have too the recent film adaptation of *Disgrace* which allows us to take the discussion of authorship, authenticity, and textuality further, raising issues regarding the "South Africanness" of *Disgrace*, since the author of the novel now holds Australian citizenship, the film producers are Australian, and David Lurie is played by a famous American actor (John Malkovich); in terms of location, the Eastern Cape scenes at Lucy's smallholding are transposed here to the Cedarberg mountains north of Cape Town, thus cinematically moving the story outside the historically embedded "Frontier Country" of the novel. What plots does the film emphasise, what does it leave out, and what are the implications of staging a novel outside its "real" setting? How do these two genres – film and fiction – handle the various plots of *Disgrace* differently?

At MA level, each week includes one or two works of fiction or non-fiction within a particular framework. One year I taught *Disgrace* towards the end of Term 2 in my "New South Africa" section of the course under the framework "Truth, Confession & Reconciliation" – here we looked at ideas of a "TRC" genre in film and creative non-fiction, using Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull* and the film adaptation starring Juliette Binoche, *In My Country*, as companion texts (other extracts included the films *Forgiveness* and *Red Dust*, the latter adapted from Gillian Slovo's novel and starring Hilary Swank); the following year I moved it to the beginning of Term 1 in the "Travelling Africa" section of the course under a

framework closer to my own research interests, “Cape Provincial: Narrating the Post/Colony,” as a follow-up to the extracts from colonial travel accounts from the Cape of Good Hope that we had read the previous week. I introduced *Disgrace* as a contemporary take on some of the issues Coetzee has written about in his monograph on colonial South African literature, *White Writing*, particularly with reference to his essay on the farm novel (for an excellent discussion of the anti/pastoral in Coetzee’s fiction, see Rita Barnard’s chapter on “Dream Topographies” in *Apartheid and Beyond*). Having looked at the novel’s geography (its move from the Western Cape to the Eastern Cape, and the implications of this), and its references to Cape history (intriguingly signalled by the historical geography of “Kaffraria,” and thus reminding students of South African history of the frontier wars in particular), the rest of the agenda was then dictated both by students who were making presentations on the novel that day (their essays-in-progress) and in my survey from all members of the seminar of what might be considered the novel’s “hot topics.” For example, what storylines are highlighted and what storylines seem to be missing from various reviews, or even below from [Secker & Warburg’s](#) advance information sheet on *Disgrace*?

Description: A divorced, middle-aged English professor finds himself increasingly unable to resist affairs with his female students. When discovered by the college authorities, he is expected to apologise and repent in an effort to save his job, but he refuses to become a scapegoat in what he sees as a show trial designed to reinforce a stringent political correctness. He preempts the authorities and leaves his job, and the city, to spend time with his grown-up lesbian daughter on her remote farm. Things between them are strained – there is much from the past that they need to reconcile –

and the situation becomes critical when they are the victims of a brutal and horrifying attack.¹

The advance information from the publishers is remarkably *non-specific*. There is no mention, for example, of South Africa, the names of the characters, the Byron opera, or the dogs. We then compare this with the published blurb and reviews on the most recent US [and](#) UK paperback editions. How representative are these widely circulated review extracts of the range of responses in schools, the academy, the media, and the general public?

Despite the award of a second Booker Prize, and worldwide acclaim, *Disgrace* has been Coetzee's most controversial novel to date. I have written about this in an essay in Morrison & Watkins (eds), *Scandalous Fictions*, and this also inevitably informs my teaching of the novel and is relevant to the present essay. The question really is regarding the link between prizes, scandal, and the canonical, and here Graham Huggan's *The Postcolonial Exotic*, particularly the Introduction and chapter on the Booker Prize, provides an excellent background for seminar discussion.

Critics have been slow to react to the Byron plot in *Disgrace*, but if we think of the centrality of Defoe to *Foe*, it is worthwhile questioning what exactly Byron's role in *Disgrace* is. If we go outside Coetzee's novel and learn something of Byron's biography and his place in the literary canon and as a radical figure in what has come to be known as the Romantic school (and this of course only after Byron's death), the intertextuality –

especially in Lurie's teaching of *Don Juan* – presents us with a fascinating interplay between the novel and real life.

Like Byron's poem, David Lurie's chamber opera is never finished; however, like Coetzee's *Disgrace* and also Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (another key nineteenth-century novel alluded to by Coetzee in his brief references to Flaubert's protagonist, Emma Bovary) on publication there are issues of scandal and censure or censorship. Byron, Flaubert, and Coetzee have all written acclaimed masterpieces, but their works equally attract strong disapproval. How do we account for this mixed reception? And is it possible to suggest that scandal and intertextuality *contribute* to a book's canonical status?

We can see in this key passage from *Disgrace* how Coetzee ironically anticipates – in metafictional fashion – the way in which he and his book will be read, how readers might conflate him (Coetzee) with his character David Lurie.

“We continue with Byron,” he says, plunging into his notes. “As we saw last week, notoriety and scandal affected not only Byron's life but the way in which his poems were received by the public. Byron the man found himself conflated with his own poetic creations – with Harold, Manfred, even Don Juan.” (31)

On a recent visit to Hout Bay outside Cape Town, I happened upon the fishing boat in the photographs below.



Imagine the speculation that followed. The boat is well-used, its crew say it has been around for many years, but it raises the question: if the boat owner did not, in all likelihood, name the boat after Coetzee's character, did Coetzee name his character after this boat, perhaps strolling along the docks one summer's evening after dinner at Mariner's Wharf? I have no intention of asking Coetzee himself such a question, and this is not even a serious question, but I do ask my students to consider the scenario as a way of playfully engaging them in questions of authorship. The point is that the ubiquitous presence of Coetzee's *Disgrace* in the public sphere has in fact created a kind of industry around it, in ways reminiscent of social realism – indeed, I have heard there are t-shirts demanding to know, “Who the f*** is David Lurie?”, as if he is ever-present, but

somehow elusive! The character David Lurie has now become as real to some readers as his author J. M. Coetzee, just as Robinson Crusoe became as real to eighteenth-century readers as Daniel Defoe – an idea which is central to the story of Coetzee’s Nobel Prize address, “He and His Man.”

Coetzee’s long career as an academic – a former professor at the University of Cape Town and as a novelist now living in Australia – is the rather brief biography I offer students as a way of posing different theoretical positions regarding author and text (in the Barthesian sense). Coetzee’s own fiction constantly interrogates this position – most recently in the trilogy of what his publishers are now directly calling “fictionalized memoir” – *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime*. To illustrate the ways in which we might situate Coetzee biographically whilst focussing more directly on the fiction itself, I show the 1997 documentary – *John M. Coetzee: Passages* – which features Coetzee on his home ground in Cape Town in front of several autobiographical sites; it also includes interviews with critics and colleagues, and readings by Coetzee from each of his novels up to *The Master of Petersburg*. We do not see our author reading, but only hear him whilst watching a beautiful photographic sequence shot in his native Cape. This provides an interesting backdrop to debates regarding the status of *Foe* in the Coetzee canon; the question of its “South African-ness” and accessibility in the light of its elaborate intertextuality. How dependent is our reading of *Foe* on positioning it in Coetzee’s canon as a whole, on our knowledge of Defoe, on previous authors and texts? How does our reading of *Foe* and *Disgrace* change over time, in the context of new histories and Coetzee’s later works?

The particularity of the New South African setting of *Disgrace*, published in 1999 only five years into democracy, and the implicit, rather than explicit, plot of the gang-rape of Lucy on the farm, provoked accusations of racism. In addition to the transcript of the ANC's racism and media enquiry, I show the BBC documentary by Christopher Hope from 2003 – since it provides both an overview of the Nobel Laureate in a South African context and includes a crucial segment on the ANC's reaction to *Disgrace*. But as we see in the cartoon below, the author once condemned locally for his “unpatriotic” book is later celebrated for his global literary stature.

190 Scandalous Fictions

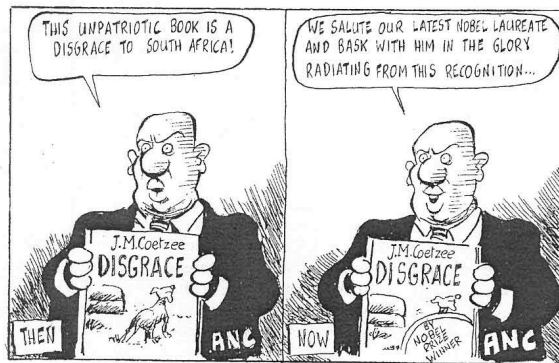


Figure 1 Coetzee Cartoon: Stidy, *Weekend Witness*, 4 October 2003

Coetzee's work has always elicited controversy on the local level, for there is always the pressure of what readers *expect* of a Coetzee novel. The question of prescriptiveness and writing fiction during apartheid is one that has a long history in South Africa, particularly with the dominance of social history and social realism in South African academia during this time. *How* Coetzee's work has been read is important to discussions of *Foe* and *Disgrace* in light of their differences and their now “classic” status. Indeed, Coetzee's own essay, “What Is a Classic?”, which echoes T. S. Eliot's essay of this title, tries to unravel what

makes a classic, and his own preoccupations with classic, European authors, provide an interesting platform for discussions of intertextuality and canonicity.